

About the sense and nonsense of a 'development' label

Track 40 of the EASST conference in Trento was entirely dedicated to papers that related to The Global North/South Divide (track name), resulting in 4 sessions with 18 presentations in total. In this respect, Track 40 could be considered a success. Elsewhere in the conference another dozen papers were presented that used empirical data from so-called “less developed” countries¹. Many of the authors of these papers gathered for an informal round table about “STS and developing contexts”. Two important observations emerged from that meeting.

First, of all presentations at the EASST conference, less than 1 in 20 was in some way based on empirical data taken from “less-developed” countries. In other words, 95% of all presentations were based on empirical data taken from a very particular kind of society – so-called “western” society – that, as we all know, represents only 20% of the world population. There is such a variety of social configurations around the globe, including incredible variations of situated knowledge, but nonetheless STS predominantly sticks to this one particular kind of society. We argue that STS should seize more often the opportunity to study science and technology in non-western societies, or to compare dynamics in different societies, or to validate taken-for-granted theories in non-western societies. This is not a plea to study science and technology in “developing” contexts. Rather, this is a call to study science and technology in different contexts. STS should adhere to the reality of scientific and technological globalisation, thus internationalise its scope and thereby produce additional critical perspectives on a globalised and entangled world.

Second, the group advanced that there are few convincing arguments to put all presentations related to “less developed” countries into one single track. Track 40 included presentations as different as the entire EASST conference: Papers covered fields varying from medicine over agriculture to information and communication technology; authors used concepts such as user-technology interaction, technological determinism, diffusion of innovations, etc.... So, what did these papers have in common except of having taken data from a “less developed” country? And what have “less developed” countries in common anyway, apart from the vague characteristic that they are “non-western”? Unless a paper has something to tell about science and technology related to the very idea of “development” or about the relationship between North and South as such, there is not much to say for putting all presentations that take data from “less developed” countries in one single track. Quite the contrary! It would have been interesting if each of the 41 tracks of the EASST010 conference would have included data from western societies as well as other societies in order to confront these perspectives with each other. This could produce truly new insights (innovative perspectives of STS). If we think about the example of a paper about diffusion of innovations in a non-western country is “hidden” in the “development” track, instead of being presented in the “innovations” track, no such confrontation is possible. The findings generated from development contexts often serve as case studies for wider questions that reach beyond the “development” category.

So, these two observations lead to two suggestions. First, we believe that it would be useful for STS to internationalise, not only in terms of nationality of scholars, but also its sources of data gathering. Second, paper presenters that took data from “less developed” countries should not feel uncomfortable at presenting their work in a specific track – for example about innovation – rather than presenting it in a general track that happened to get the “development” label. In this way empirical data obtained in non-western contexts equally would gain greater relevance for the entire STS community. This, however, is not an argument against having some kind of “development”

¹“Developed”, “less developed” and “development” are controversial terms. In the text we nevertheless use the term “less developed countries”, in scare quotes, since in the common imaginary the term does really indicate a certain category of countries. Further in the text we use “non-western” to indicate more or less the same category of countries. “Western”/“non-western” is taken as a more value neutral term, although the implication of where the “central” dividing point lies and the silencing of the “north/south” dimension are also value-laden.

track. Such a track does make sense provided that the papers presented there would relate to the very idea of “development” or to the very practice of development aid.

These discussions will be continued. They also need to be extended in various directions (e.g. particular methodological issues or theoretical frames). Therefore, a mailing list has been set up that is open to everybody: developmenSTS@googlegroups.com. Besides that, the forum www.st-and-dev.net, too, will continue to be a good meeting place for scholars who are interested in these issues.

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